

# Chuuk (Truk) Lagoon

*Lloyd Borrett reports on his May 2011 trip to dive the famed WW2 wrecks of Micronesia's Chuuk (Truk) Lagoon.*

## Some Historic Background

In 1920 the League of Nations handed over the Caroline, Marshall and Marianas islands to Japan as a reward for being on the winning side in World War I. While the Treaty of Versailles stated "... no military or naval bases shall be established in the territory," in a few years the Japanese started systematically breaking the treaty in preparation for their imperialistic designs on the greater Pacific region.

The only honourable thing to do was to leave the League, which the Japanese did in 1934, immediately posting "No Trespassing" signs all over the region. One very prohibited area was Truk Lagoon in the eastern Carolines.

After that 7 December 1941 day of infamy at Pearl Harbour, the Japanese Fourth Fleet established a command centre and anchorages at Truk. Soon they were joined by the Sixth Destroyer Flotilla, Seventh Submarine Flotilla and 17<sup>th</sup> Air Corps.

In August 1942, Admiral Isoroko Yamamoto, the guy in charge of everything with a rising sun ensign, made Truk his headquarters. At one time 40,000 Japanese were stationed on the islands in the lagoon. They constructed more than 1,200 buildings, including a huge hospital, communications centres, barracks and repair shops.

They also built fuel storage tanks, ammunition dumps, fortifications, anti-aircraft gun emplacements, seaplane and submarine bases, plus several deep water anchorages. All of these facilities, plus the presence of the Commander of the Combined Fleet, helped foster the belief that Truk was an impregnable fortress, a veritable Gibraltar of the Pacific.

By early 1944, the U.S. and allied naval forces of Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet, Admiral Chester Nimitz were well underway across the Pacific, systematically hitting one Japanese base after another. Task Force 58, one of the most powerful naval forces ever put together, commanded by Rear Admiral Marc Mitscher, had just devastated Kwajalein in the Marshall Islands. Looking at a map, you wouldn't have to be a genius to deduce that Truk's days were numbered. As if to confirm this, on 4 February 1944 a high flying, solitary B-24 was sent to take reconnaissance photos of Truk Lagoon. Once developed, these photos showed the anchorages crowded with all manner of warships and support craft.

However, this over flight hadn't gone unnoticed. Admiral Koga, who'd taken over in April 1943 when Yamamoto's plane was shot down, put two and two together and had his big combat ships make way to Palau. Kogo himself, apparently figuring he could get a better perspective on everything from a distance, hopped aboard the giant battleship Musashi bound for Singapore. (He would die a month later in an air accident.)

U.S. Rear Admiral Mitscher, his boss Vice-Admiral Raymond Spruance, and the other allied planners had heard all of that Gibraltar talk, so they ruled out an amphibious assault of Truk. Since there wasn't any land handy for land based aircraft, and since the Japanese fleet moorings were too far inside the lagoon for naval gunfire to reach them, they decided to try something unprecedented in the annals of naval warfare. An attack carried out solely by carrier based aircraft.

Mitscher came prepared. His three task groups included the carriers Enterprise, Yorktown, Belleau Wood, Essex, Intrepid, Cabot, Bunker Hill, Monterey and Cowpens; the battleships North Carolina, Massachusetts, South Dakota, Alabama, Iowa and New Jersey; the cruisers Sante Fe, Mobile, Biloxi, Oakland, San Diego, San Francisco, Wichita, Baltimore, Minneapolis and New





Orleans; plus assorted destroyers and submarines.

Before sun-up on 17 February 1944 they were sitting about 145 kilometres (90 miles) from Truk, ready to launch Operation Hailstone. One after another 72 Hellcat fighters catapulted off the carrier decks with orders to destroy enemy aircraft and gain control of the skies over the lagoon.

Then a second wave of 18 Dauntless dive bombers peppered the airfields with incendiaries and fragmentation bombs. Next came a wave of fighters, dive bombers and torpedo bombers bent on destroying every ship in the lagoon. Such was their enthusiasm for the task at hand that a number of pilots made a little more U.S. naval history, continuing their carrier operations right through the night.

Meanwhile, Mitscher's battleships, cruisers and destroyers were patrolling nearby waters looking out for enemy shipping. And outside the two unmined reef passes, packs of submarines sat, waiting to surprise any Japanese ships favouring discretion over valour. Other subs stood by to pick up downed airmen. One, the Tang, did itself proud by fishing 22 crewmen out of the water, some from inside the lagoon.

In reply, the Japanese didn't particularly distinguish themselves. They shot down some of the 26 planes lost by the U.S. And towards evening on the first day they launched seven Kate torpedo bombers, one of which managed a hit on Intrepid, killing 11 men, injuring 17 and sending the carrier to Majuro for repairs.

This poor showing by the Japanese imperial forces was due in part to the quick destruction done to their airstrips, as well as a shortage of experienced pilots following the battles of the Coral Sea and Midway. But mainly it was the result of some pretty fuzzy strategic thinking.

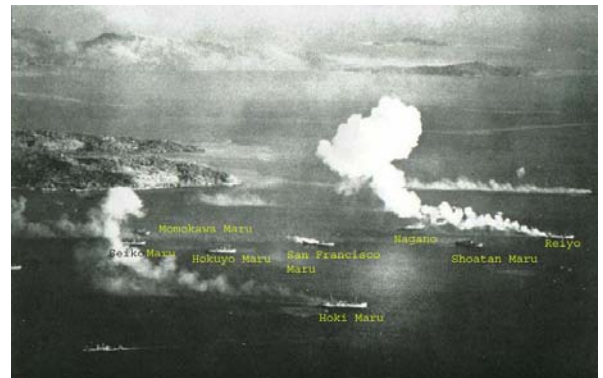
The Japanese command left the defence of this enormous, extremely important base to just a handful of troops and a mere 40 anti-aircraft guns. Sure they had their planes, but they weren't much use after the second wave.

By the end of the second day, 30 waves of planes had flown 1250 sorties, unloading 400 tons of bombs and aerial torpedoes – 15 times the ordinance dropped by the Japanese at Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941. They had destroyed 90% of the Japanese shore installations and all of the airfields. They put over 250 planes out of commission.

Most importantly, they sank or crippled more than 30 major vessels, most notably the cruiser Naka, the auxiliary cruisers Aikoku Maru and Ki-yosumi Maru, the destroyers Fumitsuki and Oite, the submarine tenders Rio de Janeiro Maru and Heian Maru, as well as six tankers and 17 freighters. So much for that Gibraltar of the Pacific myth! Finished for the time being, Task Force 58 steamed on to Guam, Tinian, Saipan and Eniwetok. A couple of months later, near the end of April 1944, they paid a return visit to Truk and added another 93 planes to their total, 59 in the air and 34 on the ground. This time 35 U.S. planes were lost. Subsequent attacks took place in May and June 1944.

Not only did all this spectacular carnage go a long way towards ending the war in Pacific, it also created the all-time greatest collection of artificial reefs anywhere in the underwater world.

It could have been a lot worse for the Japanese. Had the attack come a few days earlier, the Japanese Combined Fleet could have been reduced by an additional battleship, a couple of carriers, five or six heavy cruisers, two or more light cruisers, over a dozen destroyers and nearly that



many submarines.

### **Learning About Chuuk (Truk)**

I first read about the graveyard of sunken ships at Chuuk (Truk) Lagoon soon after I started scuba diving in 2006. As I progressed in my diving and became interested in wreck diving, the idea of all of those huge wrecks resting in clear, tropical waters at Chuuk Lagoon so intrigued me that I vowed to dive them one day.

However, first came planning for a subsequently cancelled dive trip to Bikini Atoll in June 2009, and then a successful expedition to dive the HMS Hermes aircraft carrier off Sri Lanka in August 2010. Still, those who had been there kept telling me I just had to dive the wrecks at Chuuk Lagoon, so one day late last year I sat down with Peter Fear at The S.C.U.B.A. Doctor and we worked out a trip plan for 5 days of diving around my rather hectic work schedule. By the time it happened in early May 2011, there were 18 of us on the trip.

With a visit to Truk finally looking like actually happening, I started doing a little research on Micronesia in general, and Chuuk Lagoon in particular.

The books that I recommend you read are:

Hailstorm Over Truk Lagoon, by Klaus Lindemann

World War II Wrecks of the Truk Lagoon, by Dan E. Bailey

Ghost Fleet of the Truk Lagoon, by William H. Stewart

The name 'Micronesia' couldn't be more descriptive. From the Greek, it means 'tiny islands'. The current accepted tally is that there are more than 2000 dots of land, totalling an area of something like 3,200 square kilometres, lying scattered across nearly eight million square kilometres of the Pacific in a hot, wet belt between the Equator and the Tropic of Cancer.

Some are coral atolls, others sunken mountains. Some are flat and barren, others covered by lush rain forests. Some have sparkling beaches, others mangrove swamps. Still others feature rugged cliffs and crashing shorelines.

Anthropologists believe most Micronesians came originally from the Malaysia area. Over the years they developed some regional differences, most obviously their languages – they speak nine with a variety of dialects; and their appearances – they traded genes with a series of Western colonisers.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Spanish decided to bring their God to the island folk. The zealous, pious efforts of the Spanish met with considerable success, and today about half of all Micronesians look to the Vatican for spiritual guidance.

Following the Spanish-American War, Germany anxious both to become a colonial power and to take advantage of all the copra, bought the islands for 25 million pesetas. With the outbreak of the First World War, Japan moved in and seized everything they could get their hands on. Germany, having more pressing business elsewhere, withdrew without opposition. They left a legacy of increased production, expanded trade and disciplined administration. The Japanese brought progress. New roads, hospitals, cisterns, even a railroad system on Saipan to carry sugar to the docks. And, of course, they brought loads of fortifications.

Next it was the turn of the United States or, more correctly, the United Nations. When World War II ended, the islands became a U.N. trust territory, administered first by the U.S. Navy then the U.S. Department of Interior. The yanks undertook to prepare the islanders for the time when they would take their place on the world scene.



In accordance with the original intent of the trusteeship, the island groups began deciding their

own fates. In 1977 the Northern Marianas became a commonwealth. Then the Marshalls and Palau Islands split away. And in June 1983 the Federated States of Micronesia, which included Truk, voted to end U.S. administration. They formed their own constitutional government on 10 May 1979, so becoming a sovereign state after independence was attained on 3 November 1986 under a Compact of Free Association with the United States. I suppose this leaves them free to associate with whomever they choose, or choose not to.

Chuuk (Truk) is not an island; it's the most populated state in the Federated States of Micronesia, with some 55,000 people. Chuuk means mountain in the Chuukese language and was known mainly as Truk (a mispronunciation of Ruk), until 1990.

Although the Chuuk state encompasses more than 100 separate atolls, none comes close to Chuuk Atoll and Lagoon in scope. North of New Guinea, it is located mid-ocean at 7 degrees North latitude. The atoll consists of a protective reef, 225 kilometres (140 miles) around, enclosing a natural harbour 79 by 50 kilometres (49 by 30 miles), with an area of 2,130 square kilometres (820 sq miles). It has a land area of 127.4 square kilometres (49.2 sq miles).

The area consists of 11 major islands (corresponding to the 11 municipalities of Chuuk lagoon, which are Tol, Udot, Fala-Beguets, Romanum, and Eot of Faichuk group, and Moen, Fefan, Dublon, Uman, Param, and Tsis of Namoneas group) and 46 smaller ones within the lagoon, plus 41 on the fringing coral reef, and is known today as the Chuuk islands.

Chuuk Lagoon would be something special to dive even without the impressive collection of historic wrecks.

One of my main reasons for researching Chuuk was to find out about the weather conditions. No-one wants to go so far to dive during a rainy season. Reports conflicted somewhat as to the length of the wet at Chuuk, but basically it seems to run from June through September.

Because of the lagoon's proximity to the Equator, the water temperature remains a pretty constant 30 degrees Celsius (86 degrees Fahrenheit) all year round. Visibility, mostly due to a proliferous planktonic population, is not as great of some tropical locations, but superb in comparison to typical Melbourne conditions. I'm told it averages from 12 to 18 metres (40 to 60 feet), improving from October to May when the winds pick up. Naturally, these same winds can also churn the surface. The water gets really choppy when the local trades occasionally hit 55 to 75 kph (30 to 40 knots). Sediment is another problem. The wrecks, especially their innards, are blanketed by a deep cover of fine brown silt.

For these reasons it would be nice to pick a time to visit Chuuk Lagoon when the conditions were favourable, but the number of divers visiting minimal. The fewer fins stirring the silt the better. I simply didn't have that luxury, plus from what I saw, I'm not sure there is a 'quiet time' there anymore.

### **The Journey to Chuuk Lagoon**

The Scuba Doctor and Bass Strait Aquatic Club combined together using Dive Adventures to book a total of 18 people for 5 days of diving at Chuuk Lagoon. Not everyone was from Melbourne, with two from the U.K. and one from Perth included in this large dive group. Officially, the trip started from Cairns. Thus we all made various plans as to how and when we'd get there.

I joined those who decided to fly to Cairns early on Thursday, 5<sup>th</sup> May 2011. So for me it was up at 5 a.m., leaving early for the airport at 6 a.m. so as to avoid peak hour traffic, and ending up in my usual area in the long-term car park.

At the Virgin Australia check-in there were long queues, even for those just dropping bags. The airline is going to have to improve this if they truly want to compete with Qantas for business travellers as they keep saying they are. My two bags were weighed at 22 kg and 19 kg. And they didn't charge me for any excess baggage. Yippee!

On arrival at Cairns I went to the international terminal to try to check-in for the flights to Guam and Chuuk, plus leave my bags there. No such luck. So I joined up with the others coming into Cairns early, as we took the courtesy bus to the Cairns Colonial Club Resort. Lunch and dinner at the pool bar, and then off to the international terminal at Cairns airport at 9:30 p.m.

At the Continental Airlines check in for the Friday 12:30 a.m. flight to Guam, I tried to get an emergency exit row for the legroom, but was told they were all taken. I was also told that if there was a no show the crew might be able to move me. I managed to get allocated an aisle seat. Later aboard the aircraft I found the emergency exit seats weren't in use! The crew wouldn't let me move. The consolation was that I had three seats to myself.

Officially our trip started from Cairns, thus it was here at the airport that everyone came together from all of their various flights. In The Scuba Doctor group were Peter and Valerie Fear, Peter Chew, Laurent and Adelle Ailleres, Leo Scicluna, Damien, Paul Wembridge, Shook Ri, Jeff and myself. In the BSAC group were Denise and Paul Ridgeway, David and Shirley, Phil Watson, Roger (Ginge) Crook and Sophie.

Two other dive groups on their way to Chuuk Lagoon, one from Sydney and one from Brisbane, also checked in for the flight to Guam. Eventually we all boarded the plane and were on our way to Guam.

Transit in Guam was simply stupid. We're in transit, yet were required to go through immigration/customs, plus through a security check. Long queues and bureaucratic stupidity made this a totally negative, more than an hour long, experience. And they fingerprint scanned us. When did I sign up for that invasion of privacy? What absolutely useless and senseless security theatre. Next they'll be making a cavity search mandatory.

In Guam I did manage to get Continental Airlines to change my seat allocations for the rest of my three flights with them to Seat 21D, an emergency aisle seat. It cost me US\$50 per flight extra, which was worth every cent for the extra legroom.

We had a long stopover in front of us at Guam airport. Duty free wasn't very comprehensive and the food options were pretty ordinary. We did find free Wi-Fi access at gate 9, but it was unsecured and thus of limited use.

Eventually we boarded and headed off for Chuuk. I was once again quickly into my usual flight mode with my Sennheiser PXC 450 noise cancelling headphones playing a music selection from the 15,000 plus songs on my Apple iPod Classic 160Gb. We were about 20 minutes from Chuuk when Peter Fear came and interrupted my listening pleasure, telling me that it had just been announced that we were heading back to Guam because of problems with the aircraft. I thought he was pulling my leg, but sadly he wasn't. We disembarked at Guam and waited a few hours as they moved everything to a different plane, plus got a new flight and cabin crew. Eventually we were headed off to Chuuk again.

Immigration, customs and baggage claim at Chuuk was quite an experience. What a total shambles. Someone went to a lot of trouble to make that as bad as it was. Pretty easy to improve it, but no-one seems to want to. People have to queue in the sun while waiting to get processed by one of three customs/immigration people who, of course, were working at island pace.

Baggage claim was totally shambolic. Eventually we all had our bags and headed outside of the terminal. Our bags were loaded onto trucks and we started a most educational, non air-conditioned, bus ride to the Truk Blue Lagoon Resort.

We were travelling on the island's main road and it was about the worst pothole riddled, mud rutted track I'd ever seen. The bus had to travel at walking pace most of the way, criss-crossing to either side of the road as it went based on the road state.

As we bounced along, I took in the sights. The tropical vegetation provided lush evidence of Chuuk's average 254 cm (100 inch) annual rainfall. The barefoot women showed a preference for muumuu-type dresses of brilliant parrot-plumage and floral colours. The cars and light trucks sighted, were a mixture of left and right hand drive, and even those only a few years old were in advanced stages of fatal corrosion.

The dwellings ran the gamut. I saw a few carefully restored Japanese style houses. Some cubistic structures made of concrete blocks. Some are double storey, but most are single storey with the steel reinforcing sticking out of the roof, ready for when the second floor is to be added sometime



in the future. You've just got to love their optimism. However, most common of all were haphazard shanties of corrugated tin and wood.

In my research I'd read how some years earlier the women of Chuuk cleverly countered a growing drinking problem in the district by organising a prohibition referendum. The clever part was in the timing of the voting for Sunday morning, when most of the menfolk were still too indisposed to participate. However, this prohibition is now long gone.

[pic: Blue Lagoon Resort 1- page 47]

The Truk Blue Lagoon Resort provided a startling contrast to the rather laid back aspect of all we'd passed on the way from the airport. Carefully manicured, emerald green lawns, with colourful shrubs and rows of stately palms greeted us.

Initially booked to share a room, Damian and I had decided to get separate rooms the weekend before, and appropriate arrangements were made. But none of these arrangements had made it to the people at reception. Thus I had a 45 minute wait for Room 411, upstairs in the long block of resort rooms between the resort office and the dive shop.

[pic: Blue Lagoon Resort room—page 47]

The room was spacious with wall to wall carpeting and twin double beds. It was comfortable thanks to the air conditioning. There was a new TV, but no aerial connection or DVD player, so it's possibly for decoration only. Floor to ceiling windows faced the water and slid open to allow me out onto the private balcony, where one could take in the magnificent views of the lagoon and islands.

[pic: Blue Lagoon Resort room view—page 47]

Before dinner I took a short walk to the local shop to purchase provisions of Fuji apples and bottled water, which all managed to fit in my room's bar fridge. I was just as intrigued by what the local shop did stock, as by what it didn't stock. A real insight into the lives of the locals.

Dinner that night involved a 30 minute wait to be served and an additional 45 minute wait for the meal to arrive. A large, cold, salty rib eye steak cooked well done not medium rare as requested, plus cold chips. No choice of sauces available. Obviously after the cook plates the meal, it gets to sit round for ages before being served.

After dinner, I made my way back to my room and was sound asleep by 8:30 p.m.

Saturday, 7<sup>th</sup> May 2011 started with breakfast at 6:30 a.m. There was a 15 minute wait to be served and a 30 minute wait for the wrong meal to be delivered. Part of the meal was never delivered. On my trips to Bali and Vanuatu, the places I stayed at were run by ex-pat Australians. Here in Chuuk, the resort and dive shop were run entirely by the Chuukese, so one has to adapt to the differences this brings.

Time to go diving.

### **Diving at Chuuk Lagoon**

I made the short walk to the Blue Lagoon Dive Shop at 8 a.m. to unpack and setup my dive gear. A set of manifolded twin aluminium 80s (11 litres) with DIN valve fittings were waiting for me. (I needn't have packed my OMS dual cylinder travel bands and two Apeks DIN to Yoke adapters.)

I queried the length of one of the bolts on the bands but was told it would be okay. Of course it turned out it wasn't okay and we had to adjust it later on the dive boat. Thankfully Peter Fear had some tools with him on board.

There were two snorkelers and sixteen divers in our group, so Peter Fear had organised for us to have three dive boats.



Peter Fear, Peter Chew, Laurent Ailleres and myself had all come equipped to dive using twins, so as to allow us to plan decompression dives with longer bottom times. We also planned to use stage cylinders with EAN60 on most dives to accelerate our decompression times. As our dive profiles would be quite different to the others, we took one of the dive boats for ourselves. Local Ansauo Renis was our boat captain and Tryvin Aisek our dive guide.

### **Fujikawa Maru**

Our first wreck was the Fujikawa Maru, a large aircraft transport with six holds. Tonnage: 6,938. Length: 132.6 metres. Beam: 17.8 metres. Launched: 15 April 1938. She was sank by a single torpedo that hit starboard amidships, just aft of the superstructure. The Fujikawa Maru sank slowly by the stern while at anchor landing most orderly, almost perfectly on an even keel in 37 metres (120 feet) of water. We rode out to the dive site in the twin Yamaha 40HP outboard powered dive boat with Ansauo steering the way. We anchored on the dive site, and after Tryvin's briefing, geared up for the dive.

[pic: Fujikawa Maru 1— page 55]

No stage cylinder for this dive as we wouldn't be staying on the bottom long enough to go into decompression. With 4 kg of lead in my weight belt and just wearing my non-buoyant Thermalskin for protection against scratches and stingers, it turned out I was well over weighted. I initially had some equalisation issues, but everything soon settled down and I was descending down towards the Fujikawa Maru. The 30 degree centigrade water was the warmest I'd ever dived in. Anyone got some ice cubes to cool it down?

As we started down I could see this awesome form lying below, like the body of some dead leviathan. Then came the straight lines that betray something man-made in the midst of everything else natural. A collection of geometric shapes of varying shades of blue. Squares, Rectangles. Circles. They gradually resolved themselves into the bridge, different deck levels, open holds and hatches, cargo booms, ladders, railings, cables, piles of debris. And guns.

Several different impressions vied for centre stage in my mind.

The size was enormous. The books said 132 metres (434 feet) in length with an 18 metre (58 feet) beam, but these are just numbers. I soon figured we could easily spend weeks just investigating this one ship.

The Quiet. Aside from the usual reassuring bubbling of used air, the clacking of shrimp and munching of parrotfish, the sensation was one of, to coin a phrase, deathly stillness. Exactly the opposite of what it must have been like that cacophonous day it went down.

Life. In direct contrast to the sombreness of the dead ship was the profusion of underwater life covering it. Just about anywhere light reached, something grew. Splashes of brilliant colour and fantastic shapes encrusted the length and breadth of the Fujikawa Maru.

The delicate, rainbow hued tree corals in particular excited my imagination, suggesting a master pastry chef had gone wild with his tubes of icing. The leather corals were huge in size and dense in numbers. Also in abundance were large, jagged-mouthed oysters. Sea whips. Frilly, white algae. Sponges. And so on.

I couldn't help thinking that there was something very ironic about having all of this beauty slowly but surely covering these weapons of war.

We headed to the large forecastle which has a large windlass. However, it is dominated by the large, old fashioned 1899 cruiser gun of 15.2 cm (6 inch) calibre, located on top of a circular platform. The barrel is slightly elevated and trained forward which suggests it was in action. Though it's hard to believe that such a flat trajectory, single purpose gun would have been much use against attacking aircraft.

[pic: Fujikawa Maru gun—page 55]

In the bottom of the first forward hold we found several drums scattered around, with spare propeller blades, heavy machine guns and aircraft wings. Large six inch shell casings can also be seen, plus a large quantity of shells arranged in rows with their tips protruding above the brown sediment. It is probably ammunition for the bow gun.

There is also a lot of small arms ammunition, an outboard boat engine and drums orderly stowed.



The tween decks of the hold have propeller blades, engine cowlings, aircraft fuselage parts, a torpedo body, tyres, coils of communication wires, porcelain insulators, and welding tanks.

Ascending out of the hold and back on deck was the large winch house. The view up the mast was breathtaking and beautiful.

Down in the bottom of hold two we found several fighter aircraft. They were now an odd assortment of cockpits, fuselage parts, wings and tail assemblies. The tween decks of this hold contain radial engines and engine cowlings.

We passed over the third hold heading to the amidships area, through into the bridge and then onto the galley with its very large stove which extends almost the full width of the room. We came across a head, or bathroom, with toilet bowls and urinals.

We headed down into the engine room. The catwalks looked particular eerie at first. Plenty of machinery is to be found at various levels in the engine room, and at the bottom are the two rows of three cylinder heads of the main engine.

[pic: Fujikawa Maru engine room. Page 55]

Exiting the engine room we passed over the rear holds and headed towards the deck house at the stern. On top of the deck house is the second of the 15.2 cm (6 inch) calibre guns.

We then turned around and headed back towards the bow and our anchor line. As we ascended I did a two minute deep stop at 15 metres before rising to 5 metres where I used the EAN50 deco cylinder hanging from the boat.

Officially, this was our check dive where Tryvin could gauge for himself just how competent we were as divers. Thus it was a no decompression dive, to a maximum depth of 28 metres with a total run time of just 53 minutes. After successfully completing a simply magnificent dive we headed back to the Blue Lagoon Dive Shop.

After a 20 minute wait to be served and then 40 minutes for the wrong order to be delivered to the table, lunch at the Truk Blue Lagoon Resort was finally over. Thankfully I didn't want the chips that were part of the dish, because they were cold.

### **Heian Maru**

At 2 p.m. we headed back to the Blue Lagoon Dive Shop. A 5 litre aluminium stage cylinder with EAN60 had been requested for me, so I analysed it (EAN61) and attached my stage regulators. With everyone aboard the dive boat, we headed out for the dive site of the Heian Maru, the largest wreck in Truk Lagoon, this time with 3 snorkelers aboard as well.

The Heian Maru was a large combined passenger-cargo liner which was converted to a submarine depot ship before the war. Tonnage: 11,616. Length: 155.4 metres. Beam: 20.1 metres. Launched: 16 April 1930. She was sunk on the second day of Operation Hailstorm by a torpedo and came to rest on her port side in 34 metres, with just 14 metres to her starboard beam.

[pic: Heian Maru 1- page 55]

Tryvin gave us another excellent dive briefing and we again geared up. I'd adjusted my weight harness down to 2 kg of lead. While gearing up I realised I hadn't put the harness on. I thought about it and decided zero lead weighting should be fine. Turned out I was right.

Hold two of the Heian Maru contained a large number of submarine torpedoes. They are 21 inches (54 cm) in diameter and quite long. Much larger than I'd expected them to be. On some the twin propellers can be seen at the tail end.

[pic: Heian Maru torpedo.– page 55]

For me the highlight of diving the Heian Maru was coming across four tubular shaped objects as we headed aft into a passageway on the promenade deck. They are approximately 6 to 10 metres long and about 25 centimetres in diameter. On one end some of them have folding handles, while the other end tapers to an asparagus-shaped head. These are spare periscopes for submarines.

As we headed further aft in the passageway we came across more of them. Periscopes are sensitive instruments with delicate optical systems. Thus they were kept out of the general cargo area and stored in the glassed in passageway for protection.

The two large ships propellers at the stern of the ship are certainly eye catching.

[pic: Heian Maru prop—page 55]

As we ascended I switched to the EAN61 on the stage cylinder at 14 metres and breathed it down to 50 bar by the end of the dive. Thus we completed a decompression dive with a maximum depth of 27 metres and 64 minutes in duration.

### **Subchaser/Gunboat**

We headed over to the Subchaser/Gunboat for a snorkel. I didn't have a snorkel with me, so I put on my weight harness with 2 kg of lead (which turned out to be not enough), grabbed an eleven litre aluminium stage cylinder with EAN60 in it, my mask and fins and went over the side. Being too buoyant, it was a bit difficult getting down to 5 metres and staying down. Grabbing on helped. Thus I had some fun taking a brief look around for 6 minutes with a maximum depth of 7 metres. With everyone back aboard after the snorkelling, we headed back to the Blue Lagoon Dive Shop. Dinner at the Truk Blue Lagoon Resort was a BBQ night. What a disaster. Somehow the meat and baked potato were colder than the air temperature. Mind you, if I'd waited for the entertainment to finish before starting on my steak, it might have warmed up a bit.

Phillip and I decided to skip the set dessert and instead headed into the restaurant for a wider selection from the dinner menu. Yes, it seems it is possible to be served banana pancakes without a banana being involved in the process of preparing the dish. Still, the banana-less pancakes were delicious and I was in my room and asleep by 8:30 p.m.

### **The Resort and Diving Routine**

And so I settled into the leisurely regime of the place. Up at 6 a.m. Sit down for breakfast at 6:30 a.m. Head out for the first dive of the day at 8:30 to 9:00 a.m. Sit down for lunch at 11 a.m. Back out to dive at 2 p.m. A snorkel/dive after the second main dive of the day. Sit down for dinner at 6:30 p.m. Asleep in bed by 9 p.m.

Before and after dinner, some people would party at the resort's bar. At other times some people would be seen in the resort's reception area trying to get an Internet connection to the outside world. The problem is, 5 to 10 people trying to share a dial-up Internet connection really doesn't work very well. People would groan as someone else came into the room holding their smartphone or laptop computer. They knew their share of the already poor Internet bandwidth was about to get even worse. A group of about 8 divers in our party organised a night dive one night. I passed on it as I'd already done two long and deep dives that day.

### **More Chuuk Lagoon Dive Details**

#### **Sunday morning, 8 May 2011 — Nippo Maru.**

I switched over to using an eleven litre aluminium stage cylinder with 150 bar of EAN61. Peter Fear suggested that as we would be doing a longer dive and using more air I should use some weight for when the aluminium cylinders became buoyant. So I grabbed 4 kg. Turned out to be way too much and I later went back to carrying no weights.

There was a group of rebreather divers already on the wreck of the Nippo Maru. Plus during the dive another boat load of divers took to the dive site as well.

The Nippo Maru is one of the most fascinating wrecks in the lagoon due to its unusual cargo. Tonnage: 3,763. Length: 107.3 metres. Beam: 15.2 metres. Launched: 16 September 1936. The wreck was only located on 16 June 1980.

[pic: Nippo Maru 1.jpg]

She was a water carrier, yet as well as this simple cargo, there are several disassembled coastal defence guns, three pieces of field artillery on wheels, a tank on deck, two trucks and a large amount of shells, shell casings and electrical components on deck and in the five holds. We proceeded to explore as much of it as we could.

Left: Nippo Maru tank on deck

Right: Nippo Maru gun]

Mindful of my air consumption I started to ascend with the dive guide while the other Page 40 or a



The deco chamber !!!



while longer. Switched to the EAN61 in the stage and completed my deep stop, deco stops and safety stop. The others still had plenty of deco to do so I just hung around with them. Decompression dive of 57 minutes with a maximum depth of 38 metres.

### **Sunday afternoon, 8 May 2011 — Rio De Janeiro Maru.**

Back at the Blue Lagoon Dive Shop after lunch, the other divers were already waiting on the dive boat, plus our three snorkelers were back with us. I had to check my stage gas. Turned out they'd filled the 5 litre cylinder used by Peter Fear on the previous dive, rather than the 11 litre one used by me. So Peter Fear and I switched cylinders.

As we geared up on the Rio De Janeiro Maru dive site, a dive boat from the Thorfin live aboard arrived.

The Rio De Janeiro Maru is a large passenger liner converted to a submarine tender and depot ship. Tonnage: 9,627. Length: 140.5 metres. Beam: 18.9 metres. The ship is lying on its starboard beam.

[pic: Rio De Janeiro Maru 1—page 55]

We headed along the port side which is now the top, back to the stern of the ship. Twin shafts emerge from the contoured bottom of the ship, with the keel separating them. Both propellers remain on the ship.

[pic: Rio De Janeiro Maru side of ship—page 55]

We headed towards the bow along what was the top of the ship and into a cargo hold. There we saw large 15 cm calibre gun barrels and shells.

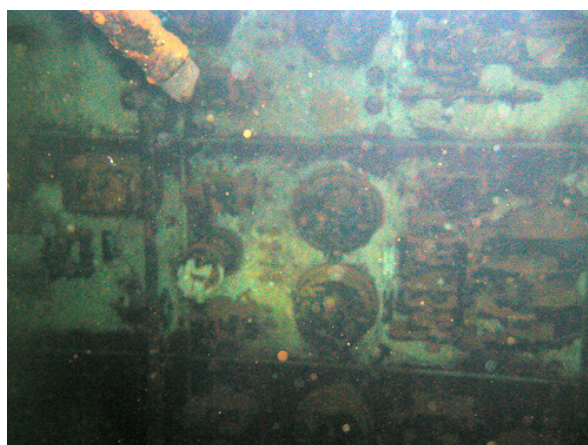
We journeyed deep into the engine room. I followed our dive guide with the others behind me. There were a few times I thought there was no way I was going to make it through in some places, but managed to do so. It turned out the others were all thinking the same thing.

[Right: Rio De Janeiro Maru engine room]

Eventually we made it to the bow and onto the port side.

As we came up to 14 metres I switched to the EAN61 stage gas. We did our deco and deep stops heading along the port side back toward the stern.

I signalled to Laurent and asked him to watch me shoot my DSMB and then did so. Turns out it wasn't in a situation that would enable him to sign it off as a part of my BSAC Sports Diver certification. Bugger! This was a decompression dive of 61 minutes with a maximum depth of 29 metres.



### **Sunday afternoon, 8 May 2011 — Japanese Zero.**

We headed over to the wreck of a Japanese Zero airplane for everyone to have a snorkel. But again, I didn't have a snorkel with me, so I put on my weight harness, this time with 8 kg of lead (which turned out to be just right), grabbed an eleven litre aluminium stage cylinder with EAN60, my mask and fins and went in.

I had a simply delightful short dive of 10 minutes with a maximum depth of 8.6 metres while check-



ing out the features of the upside down Zero. Diving in such a minimalist fashion felt quite liberating. I was the last back aboard the dive boat and then we headed back to the Blue Lagoon Dive Shop and dinner.

### **Monday morning, 9 May 2011 — Shinkoku Maru.**

With everyone aboard we headed out at 9 a.m. towards the site of the Shinkoku Maru, one of the two mandatory dives in Chuuk. She was one of the eight fleet tankers which refuelled the Japanese Strike Force for Pearl Harbour. Tonnage: 10,020. Length: 152.4 metres. Beam: 19.8 metres.

Launched: 13 December 1939. She now features magnificent coral growth and fish life after being hit by a torpedo and sinking to rest on an even keel.

[pic: Shinkoku Maru 1 —back page]

The boat crew were worried because of the rain and reduced visibility was making it difficult for them to navigate. We discussed switching to other dive sites, but decided to just proceed slowly and hope conditions would improve. They did eventually and we powered over to the dive site.

I was using an eleven litre aluminium stage cylinder with 150 bar of EAN57.

In the midship area we explored the bridge, mess, galley, a bathroom and head, plus the sick bay with its operating table.

[pic: Shinkoku Maru 1 —back page]

On this dive we penetrated deep into the engine room. At first entering the engine room was like entering a large open space in a large building. From the catwalk the view was like being in a theatre. The huge cylinder heads are held in place with fist sized nuts. Low on the port side of the engine room the torpedo hit shows as a big jagged hole.

We saw lots of very spectacular marine life as we made our way around this ship. I switched to the EAN57 stage gas and deep my deep, deco and safety stops. This was a decompression dive of 65 minutes with a maximum depth of 39 metres. What a simply wonderfully varied, relaxing and spectacular dive.

Our dive guide, Tryvin, dropped his torch while getting aboard the boat. Ansauo, our dive boat captain, geared up, dived down and retrieved the torch. Impressive.

### **Monday afternoon, 9 May 2011 — Kensho Maru.**

After lunch we headed out at 2 p.m. to the wreck site of the Kensho Maru, a medium sized, five hold freighter. Tonnage: 4,861. Length: 116 metres. Beam: 16 metres. Launched: 30 June 1938. A torpedo exploding at hold 1 caused the ship to sink in 40 metres of water.

[Right: Kensho Maru bridge]

Once in the water, we moved towards the bow. The starboard anchor is out with the chain leading around the bow and forward over the port bow, which implies the ship probable went down by the stern. The forecastle is dominated by the large artillery gun mounted on it. The lush marine growth seems to be taking on the role of combat camouflage.

The double anchor winch amidships is large and impressive. The bridge is rather dark, and as we continued aft we saw the chart room.

We entered the dark engine room, eventually finding two sets of three large cylinders of the main diesel engine. Pieces of machinery and control panels were picked out by our dive lights.

[Right: Kensho Maru engine room]

After exiting the engine room I followed Tryvin as he went through another part of the superstructure,





past the galley and a workshop. This time I got a bit stuck trying to exit a narrow passageway. Eventually I was able to readjust my gear and wriggle my way through.

As we headed back towards the bow we came across another group of divers. I switched to the EAN57 stage gas and then stuck by Peter Fear as we worked our way back to where he'd left his stage cylinder near the base of the anchor line.

We then started our ascent, and completed our deep, deco and safety stops. This was a decompression dive of 60 minutes with a maximum depth of 32 metres.

#### **Monday afternoon, 9 May 2011 — Hoyo Maru.**

We headed over to the wreck of the Hoyo Maru, a large tanker, for the afternoon snorkel. Tonnage: 8,629. Length: 143.3 metres. Beam: 18.6 metres. Launched: 29 August 1936. It capsized and broke into two parts forward of amidships as it sunk. She now rests upside down in 34 metres of water, with just 3 to 9 metres to the ship's bottom.

Some went in to have a snorkel. I again put on my weight harness with the same 8 kg of lead as I used the day before, grabbed my eleven litre aluminium stage cylinder with EAN57, my mask and fins and went in.

I had a delightful short dive checking out the features of the upside down ship. I resisted the temptation to take a look inside. The outside of the hull was covered in lots of very pretty marine life.

My dive computer requested a 3 minute safety stop and I duly complied. A dive of 11 minutes with a maximum depth of 11 metres. I was last back aboard the dive boat and then we headed back to the Blue Lagoon Dive Shop.

#### **Tuesday morning, 10 May 2011 — San Francisco Maru.**

I analysed the gas in my eleven litre aluminium stage cylinder: 200 bar of EAN60. Peter Fear wasn't joining us because of head cold and sinus issues. So it was just Peter Chew, Laurent Ailleres, yours truly and the boat crew aboard as we headed out at 9 a.m. to the San Francisco Maru.

The San Francisco Maru is a medium-large, old five hold freighter. Tonnage: 5,864. Length: 117.3 metres. Beam: 15.5 metres. Launched: 1 March 1919. She sustained very heavy damage from a close bomb miss on the port side and sank quickly by the stern.

[pic: San Francisco Maru 1—back page]

Another boat was already on the dive site. Tryvin gave us an excellent dive briefing and we agreed on a dive plan. We entered the water shortly after those on the other dive boat.

We headed down to the bow and checked out the gun on the forecastle. We then worked our way along the port side, towards the bridge and came across a battle tank as deck cargo. There are two more tanks on the starboard side.

[pic: San Francisco Maru tank on deck—back page]

In hold two between the tanks on the deck are two large tanker trucks. There is also a large radial aircraft engine and a number of 50 pound aerial bombs, standing on their tips with the tail fins exposed.

As we went along a companionway, Tryvin pointed out a shark off the port side. Hold 4 contains the remains of two large trucks, and the tween decks are filled with ammunition boxes. The shells are of 3 and 4 inch calibre. Hold 5 contains a large number of torpedo bodies scattered all about.

[pic: San Francisco Maru shells in hold - back page]

As we headed back to the bow along the starboard side I took great delight in watching a very graceful eagle ray making its way in the same direction off of the starboard side.

I switched to the EAN60 stage gas and completed my deep, deco and safety stops. This was a decompression dive of 55 minutes with a maximum depth of 55 metres.

With everyone back aboard the dive boat, we headed back to the Blue Lagoon Dive Shop.

#### **Tuesday afternoon, 10 May 2011 — Sankisan Maru.**

At 2 p.m. with three divers plus Adelle aboard, we headed out to the wreck site of the Sankisan Maru, a medium sized freighter. Tonnage: 4,776. Length: 112 metres. Beam: 15.8 metres.

Launched: 29 January 1942. She received a hit in the aft hold, which detonated its cargo of ordnances, and blew the ship apart, devastating the midship superstructure in the process.

[Right top: Sankisan Maru 1]

This time Tryvin's briefing started a little bit differently, "Bow, no stern!"

We geared up and went in, and descended towards the bow. Hold 1 had a number of trucks and lots of ammunition cartridges. Hold 2 had more trucks, plus airplane engine cowlings for Zero fighters and radial engine exhaust manifolds.

[Right photo 2: Sankisan Maru truck.]

[Right photo 3: Sankisan Maru bullets]

We made our way aft to the area where the ship is now gone and instead there is a huge U shaped depression carved out of the sea floor. Awesome.

We headed back towards the bow and then circled one of the masts as we ascended. These were rich with colourful marine life.

[Right photo 4: Sankisan Maru mast coral]

I switched to the EAN60 stage gas and completed my deep and safety stops. This was a non-decompression dive of 58 minutes with a maximum depth of 27 metres.

**Tuesday afternoon, 10 May 2011 — Subchaser/Gunboat.**

We headed over to the site of a patrol boat for a snorkel. The others went in. As I asked Ansauro to pass me a stage cylinder, he noticed some sticks in the water and told Tryvin. They then said we'd have to stop and move because we couldn't snorkel or dive here. At first I thought they were joking, but no, they were serious and proceeded to summon the others out of the water.

The sticks indicated there had been a death in the family living ashore, and that they were in mourning. So we respected the local customs and moved to the Subchaser/Gunboat for a snorkel.

As I didn't have a snorkel with me, I again put on my weight harness with 8 kg of lead, grabbed an eleven litre aluminium stage cylinder with EAN60, my mask and fins and went in. This time I had no problems staying down and checking out the wreck. This was a non-decompression dive of 7 minutes with a maximum depth of 5.5 metres.

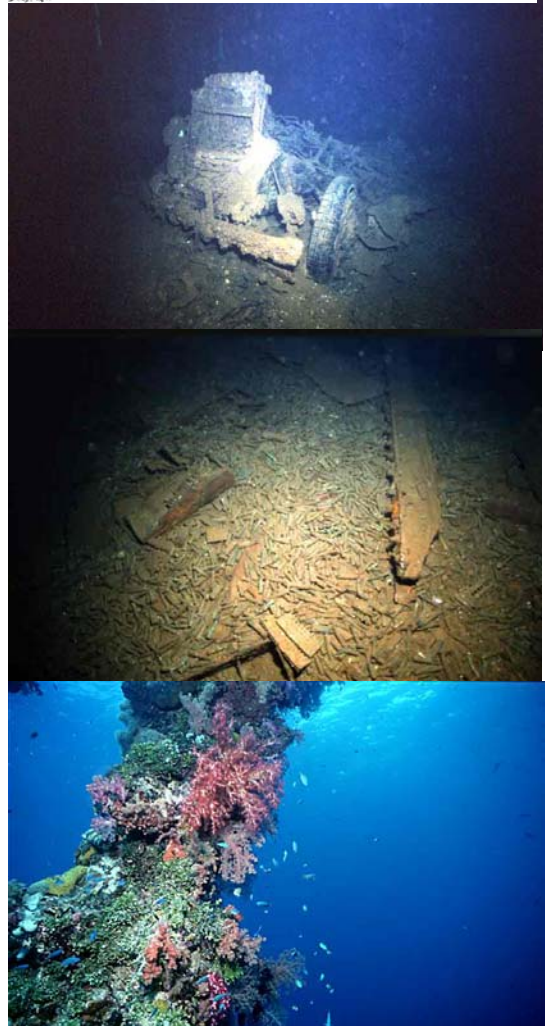
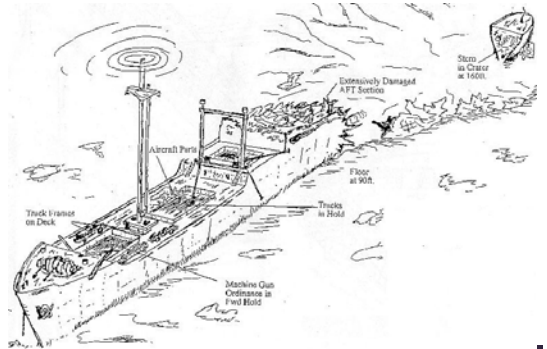
**Wednesday morning, 11 May 2011 — Hoki Maru.**

This was to be our last day of diving and the plan was to complete two dives before 1 p.m., which would give us more than 24 hours of surface time before we were due to fly out the next day.

I headed down to the Blue Lagoon Dive Shop early and checked my stage cylinder mix — 150 bar of EAN57 — and the twin cylinder fill.

Peter Fear was missing in action again, so with Laurent, Peter Chew, myself and our dive crew aboard we headed out at 8 a.m. towards the site of the Hoki Maru. The water was flat calm with a mirror polish as we skimmed across the lagoon.

The Hoki Maru is a medium-large, old fashioned freighter, captured while on a run from Freemantle to Colombo on 12 July 1942, and utilised by the Japanese Navy during the war. She was formerly the British-New Zealand ship M/V Hauraki. Tonnage: 7,112. Length: 137.2 metres. Beam: 17.8 metres. Launched: 28 November 1921. An explosion thoroughly destroyed the part of the ship between the forecastle and the bridge.



[pic: Hoki Maru 1— back page

Hold 5 was full of road building equipment: bulldozers, trucks, tractors and a steam roller. The hold amidships had munitions.

[pic: Hoki Maru bulldozer.—back page]

We penetrated deep into the engine room with its debris or torn and twisted plating. Lots of pretty marine life on the masts and superstructure.

I switched to the EAN57 stage gas and deep my deep, deco and safety stops. Laurent and Chewy had left the water and I was still hanging on the deco lines with Tryvin, when I spotted a nice looking shark checking us out. I pointed it out to Tryvin and he never took his eyes off of it from then on. This was a decompression dive of 50 minutes with a maximum depth of 42 metres.

With the dive completed and everyone back safely aboard the dive boat, instead of heading back in, we instead headed over to a nearby island for our surface interval. There we found two old guys, two young boys and two dogs enjoying the tranquillity of a picture book tropical island. There was one main hut on the island which was divided into four separate rooms. People can book to come out and stay on the island.

### **Wednesday afternoon, 11 May 2011 — Yamagiri Maru.**

With our peaceful break on the island completed, we headed over to the wreck site of the Yamagiri Maru, a large 6 hold freighter. Tonnage: 6,439. Length: 133 metres. Beam: 17.8 metres. Launched: 30 May 1939. She is now resting on her port side in 34 metres.

[pic: Yamagiri Maru 1.— right ]

I had 100 bar of air remaining in the twin 11 litre cylinders and 150 bar of EAN57 remaining in the stage. Plenty for this dive, though I'd have to monitor my air consumption carefully.

We headed down onto the wreck and deep into the engine room with its 2 rows of 3 cylinders. Tryvin showed us a skull stuck in between some machinery.

[pic: Yamagiri Maru skull]

We then made our way out and into hold 5 with its cargo of giant, amour piercing, artillery shells destined for the 46 cm (18 inch) guns of the battle-ships Yamato and Musashi. The nine 46 cm guns of these ships were the largest artillery ever put on board of any ship and had a maximum reach of 42 km. The shells are about one metre long and weigh about 1460 kg a piece. There is also a steamroller in this hold.

[pic: Yamagiri Maru shells]

As we headed back towards the bow, Laurent spotted a large shark and signalled me, but I couldn't see it. I switched to the EAN57 stage gas and did my deep and safety stops while admiring the coral growth on the side of the hull.

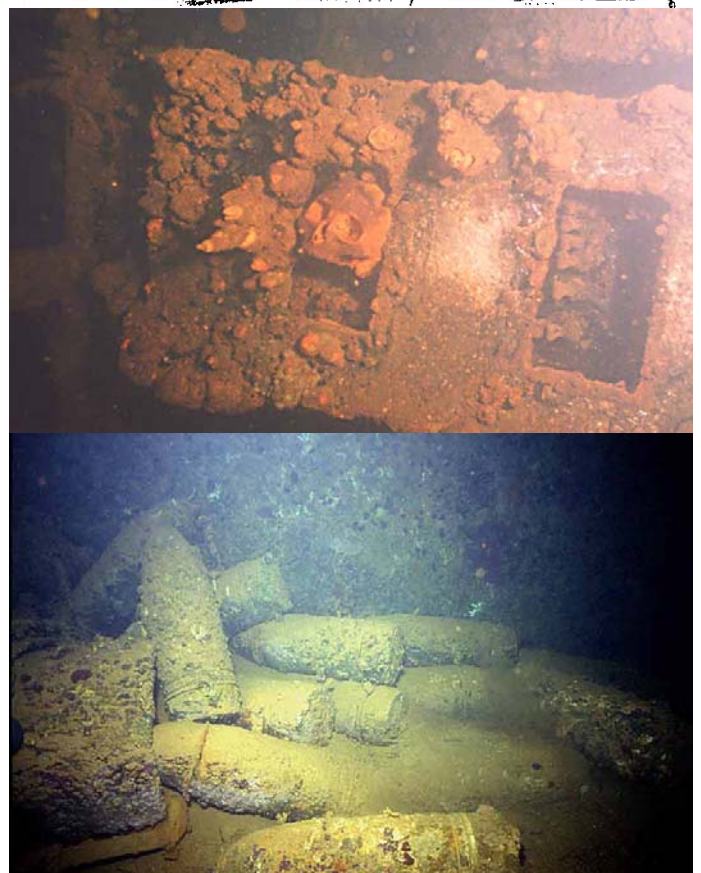
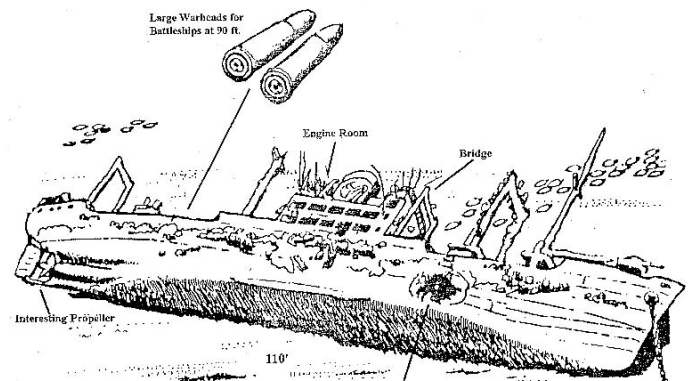
[pic: Yamagiri Maru hull coral]

This was a non-decompression dive of 36 minutes with a maximum depth of 26 metres.

### **Finishing Up at Chuuk Lagoon**

Five days of magnificent diving was at an end.

The three of us discussed the different things we





each remembered most as we headed back to the Blue Lagoon Dive Shop.

It was time to clean and dismantle our dive gear and take it back to our rooms for drying. By 1 p.m. I had everything laid out to dry on the balcony of my room and headed off for lunch at the Blue Lagoon Dive Resort. After lunch I went back to the Blue Lagoon Dive Shop to settle up my bill: US\$410 extra for the twins, stages and nitrox fills; plus US\$250 for my merchandise purchases.



Some of the others had organised to go out on a fishing trip for the afternoon. I chose to rest at the resort. The fishing trip proved to be very exciting, but no fish were caught. Dinner was a complimentary BBQ organised for our group by the Blue Lagoon Dive Shop. All three boat and dive crews joined us for this, plus cooked the BBQ feast. It was the best meal of our stay. I went up to the restaurant and ordered banana splits for Ansauro and myself. Turned out he was a bit too under the weather by the time I got back to properly enjoy his.

### **The Journey Home**

Thursday 12 May 2011 saw me up early packing dive gear. After breakfast I settled my US\$310 bill for all meals and extras with the Blue Lagoon Dive Resort. Very reasonably priced, I thought. Then it was back to the room to finish packing.

Once the packing was complete, I called reception and they had two guys come down to take my bags. I then went and waited for the bus in reception.

The bus ride to the airport was slow, as was check-in and the security check at the airport. But then we were through into the air-conditioned gate lounge area. Finally we boarded the Continental Airlines Boeing 737 aircraft and were on our way to Guam.

Guam was a repeat of the same stupid handling of transit passengers. If I can avoid having to ever go through Guam again, I will.

Some 60 or so Japanese high school girls joined the flight for Cairns. It was amusing to see the highly organised way they did everything, plus how most of them wore face masks.

After waiting a few hours, we were finally on our way to Cairns and the delight of being back in an efficient system through the airport. The Japanese school girls all had their face masks securely in place as the disembarked the aircraft. Someone must have told them the air in Cairns is poisonous. Made me wonder if the customs guys were go to run Geiger counters over them to see how radioactive they might be.

While waiting on the courtesy bus to the Cairns Colonial Club Resort we learnt some of the others were being delayed because the baggage carousel had broken down. Oh dear! Seems the system wasn't so efficient for everyone.

We eventually arrived at the Cairns Colonial Club Resort, checked in and made in to our rooms. I was sharing with Damien.

Friday, 13 May 2011 started with a full breakfast and a bus trip back to the Cairns airport. No queue at the Virgin check-in. My bags were weighed in at less than they were at the start of the trip, but this time they insisted on charging me \$200 extra for baggage. Bugger! And the flight was delayed 2 hours. Hey, I thought only Crapstar did this!

The consolation was that Cairns has a pleasant airport terminal to be in. I purchased some magazines and read. Finally we were aboard the flight and back in Melbourne.



## Lessons Learnt On The Trip

I purchased a copy of Franko's Chuuk Lagoon Dive Map — [www.frankosmaps.com](http://www.frankosmaps.com) — from the Blue Lagoon Dive Shop. It's printed on waterproof, durable synthetic paper, and provides a very useful guide to the locations of the wrecks relative to each other, plus their main features.

Avoid Guam airport if you possibly can. You'll need at least two hours between flights in order to make it through their stupid, totally bogus, procedures.

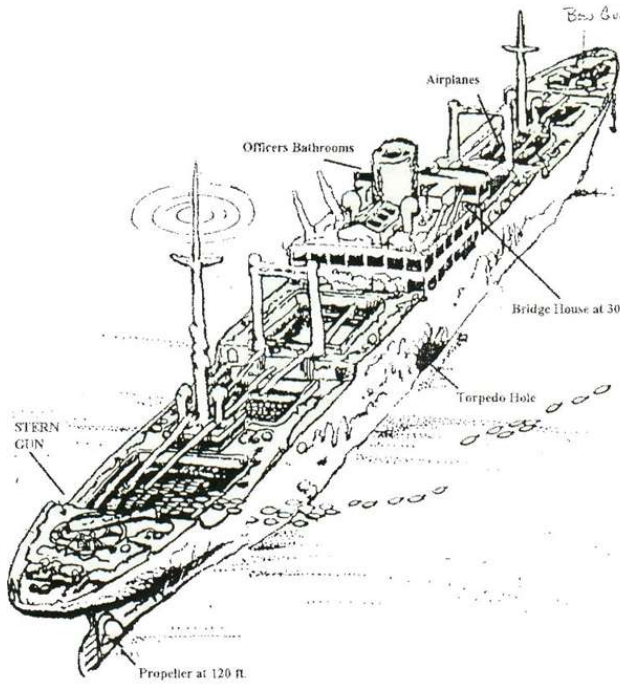
I didn't need to take my Apeks DIN to Yoke converters, my OMS twin cylinder travel bands, or my Analox nitrox analyser. The Blue Lagoon Dive Shop had this covered. There were so few people using nitrox that there were no queues for the dive shop's Trimix analyser.

The Blue Lagoon Dive Resort is the place to stay. I didn't see any other land based places that would come close. I don't see the benefit of staying on either of the two live aboard boats, especially given that they seem to mostly dive from the same size dive boats anyway.

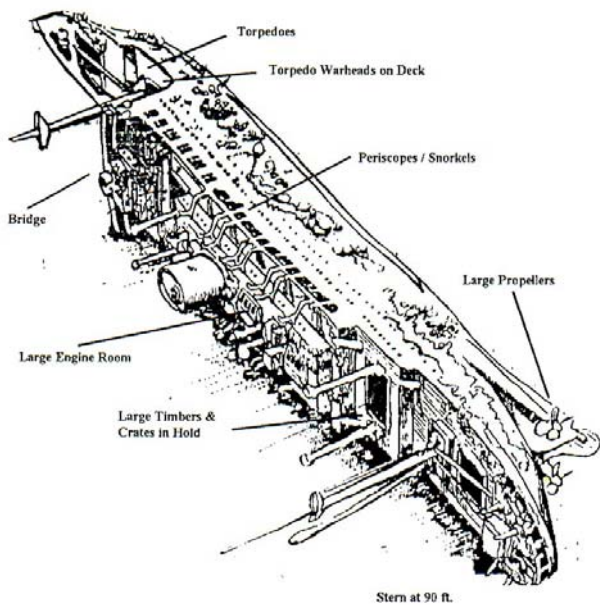
The wreck diving at Chuuk Lagoon is the best I've experienced so far. I'm told my planned trip to Bikini Atoll in 2012 will top it, but the value for money at Chuuk Lagoon is simply unbeatable. I'll be heading back there again. Indeed, I'm now questioning why I'm heading off to dive the Darwin and Wolf groups at Galapagos in August 2011. For the price of that dive trip I could probably go back to Chuuk Lagoon three times!





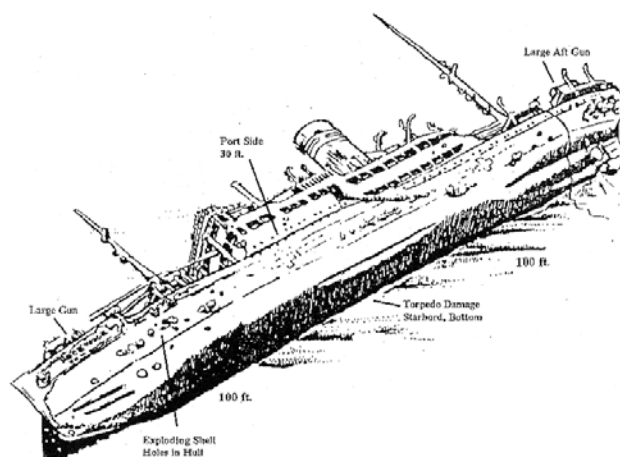


Fujikawa Maru — top 3 photos



See Lloyd's story page 32

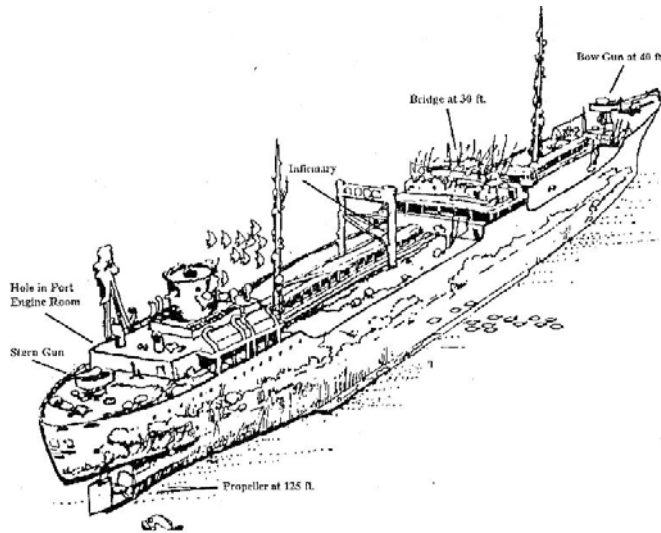
Hein Maru - Middle 3 photos



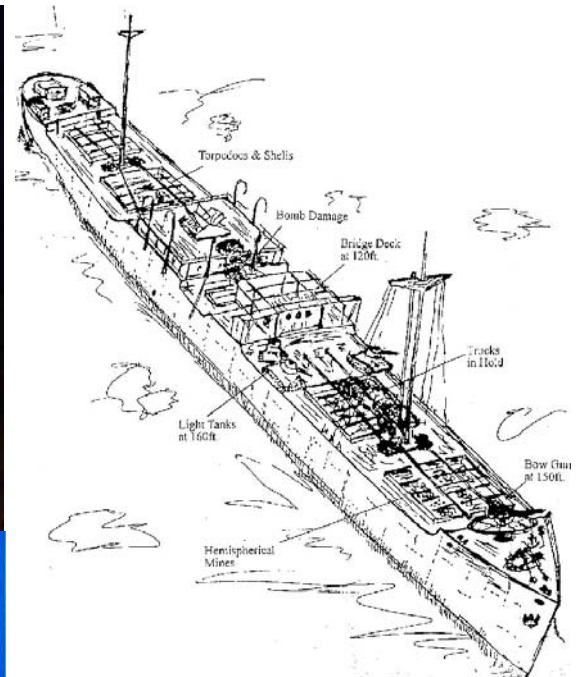
Rio de Janeiro - bottom two photos







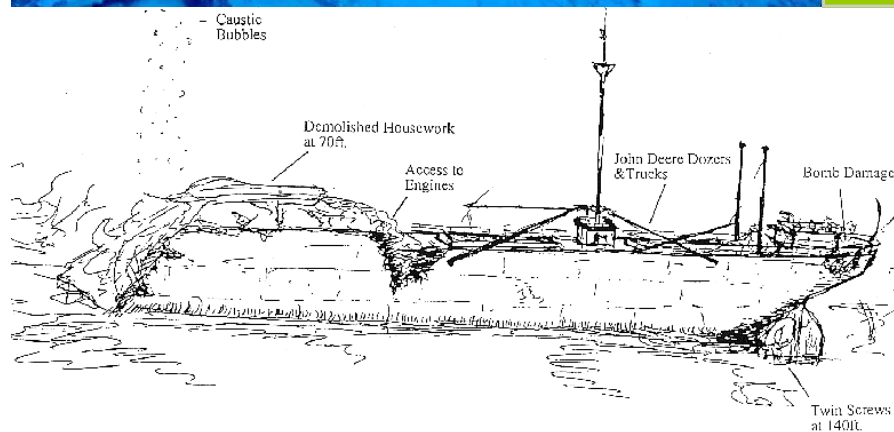
Shinkoku Maru — Operating theatre



San Francisco Maru



Photos on this page and 2nd back page to accompany Lloyd's story on Pages 32 to 37



Hoki Maru

